



# The Mongol Empire

## MAIN IDEA

### CULTURAL INTERACTION

As emperor of China, Kublai Khan encouraged foreign trade.

## WHY IT MATTERS NOW

The influence of Chinese ideas on Western civilization began with the Mongols' encouragement of trade.

## TERMS & NAMES

- Kublai Khan
- Marco Polo

**SETTING THE STAGE** **Kublai Khan**, the grandson of Genghis Khan, assumed the title Great Khan in 1260. In theory, the Great Khan ruled the entire Mongol Empire. In reality, the empire had split into four khanates. Other descendants of Genghis ruled Central Asia, Persia, and Russia as semi-independent states. So, Kublai focused instead on extending the power and range of his own khanate, which already included Mongolia, Korea, Tibet, and northern China. To begin, however, he had to fulfill the goal of his grandfather to conquer all of China.

## Kublai Khan Becomes Emperor

The Chinese held off Kublai's attacks for several years. However, his armies finally overwhelmed them in 1279. Throughout China's long history, the Chinese feared and fought off invasions by northern nomads. China sometimes lost territory to nomadic groups, but no foreigner had ever ruled the whole country. With Kublai's victory, that changed.

**Beginning a New Dynasty** As China's new emperor, Kublai Khan founded a new dynasty called the Yuan (yoo•AHN) Dynasty. It lasted less than a century, until 1368, when it was overthrown. However, the Yuan era was an important period in Chinese history for several reasons. First, Kublai Khan united China for the first time in more than 300 years. For this he is considered one of China's great emperors. Second, the control imposed by the Mongols across all of Asia opened China to greater foreign contacts and trade. Finally, Kublai and his successors tolerated Chinese culture and made few changes to the system of government.

Unlike his Mongol ancestors, Kublai abandoned the Mongolian steppes for China. He did not share his ancestors' dislike of the settled life. On the contrary, he rather enjoyed living in the luxurious manner of a Chinese emperor. He maintained a beautiful summer palace at Shangdu, on the border between Mongolia and China. He also built a new square-walled capital at the site of modern Beijing. Kublai built this palace to enhance his prestige, but his new capital meant something more. Previously, the Great Khans had ruled their empire from Mongolia. Moving the capital from Mongolia to China was a sign that Kublai intended to make his mark as emperor of China.

**Failure to Conquer Japan** After conquering China, Kublai Khan tried to extend his rule to Japan. In 1274 and again in 1281, the Great Khan sent huge fleets

## TAKING NOTES

### Recognizing Effects

Use a web diagram to show the impact of Kublai Khan on East Asia.

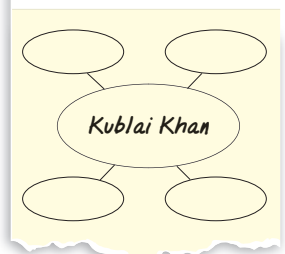


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▲ This detail from a 13th-century Japanese scroll depicts Japanese warriors fighting off a Mongol warship.

against Japan. The Mongols forced Koreans to build, sail, and provide provisions for the boats, a costly task that almost ruined Korea. Both times the Japanese turned back the Mongol fleets.

The second fleet carried 150,000 Mongol, Chinese, and Korean warriors—the largest seaborne invasion force in history until World War II. After 53 days, Japanese warriors had fought the invaders to a standstill. Then, on the following day, the sky darkened and a typhoon swept furiously across the Sea of Japan. Mongol ships were upended, swamped, and dashed to bits against the rocky shore, despite their sailors' attempts to escape onto the open sea. For centuries afterward, the Japanese spoke reverently of the *kamikaze*, or “divine wind,” that had saved Japan.

## Mongol Rule in China

Early in Kublai Khan's reign, one of his Chinese advisers told him, “I have heard that one can conquer the empire on horseback, but one cannot govern it on horseback.” This advice illustrates the problems Kublai faced as emperor. Mongol ways would not work in a sophisticated civilization like China's. Besides, the number of Mongols in China was few compared to the huge native population. Kublai would need to make use of non-Mongol officials to help him rule successfully.

**The Mongols and the Chinese** The Mongol rulers had little in common with their Chinese subjects. Because of their differences, the Mongols kept their separate identity. Mongols lived apart from the Chinese and obeyed different laws. They kept the Chinese out of high government offices, although they retained as many Chinese officials as possible to serve on the local level. Most of the highest government posts went to Mongols or to foreigners. The Mongols believed that foreigners were more trustworthy since they had no local loyalties. **A**

Despite his differences with the Chinese, Kublai Khan was an able leader. He restored the Grand Canal and extended it 135 miles north to Beijing. Along its banks he built a paved highway that ran some 1,100 miles, from Hangzhou to Beijing. These land and water routes ensured the north a steady supply of grain and other goods from the southern heartland.

**Foreign Trade** Foreign trade increased under Kublai Khan. This was largely due to the Mongol Peace, which made the caravan routes across Central Asia safe for trade and travel. Traders transported Chinese silk and porcelain, which were greatly valued in Europe and western Asia, over the Silk Roads and other routes. These traders also carried with them such Chinese products and inventions as printing, gunpowder, the compass, paper currency, and playing cards.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Making Inferences

**A** How might the Chinese have felt about their lack of power in Kublai's government?

Kublai further encouraged trade by inviting foreign merchants to visit China. Most of them were Muslims from India, Central Asia, and Persia. Many European traders and travelers, including Christian missionaries, also reached China.

**Marco Polo at the Mongol Court** The most famous European to visit China in these years was a young Venetian trader, **Marco Polo**. He traveled by caravan on the Silk Roads with his father and uncle, arriving at Kublai Khan's court around 1275. Polo had learned several Asian languages in his travels, and Kublai Khan sent him to various Chinese cities on government missions. Polo served the Great Khan well for 17 years. In 1292, the Polos left China and made the long journey back to Venice. **B**

Later, during a war against Venice's rival city, Genoa, Marco Polo was captured and imprisoned. In prison he had time to tell the full story of his travels and adventures. To his awed listeners, he spoke of China's fabulous cities, its fantastic wealth, and the strange things he had seen there. He mentioned the burning of "black stones" (coal) in Chinese homes. (Coal as a fuel was little known in Europe.) He also recorded the practical workings of Kublai's government and aspects of Chinese life. Here is his description of trade in Beijing:

#### PRIMARY SOURCE

[M]ore precious and costly wares are imported into Khan-balik [Beijing] than into any other city in the world. . . . All the treasures that come from India—precious stones, pearls, and other rarities—are brought here. So too are the choicest and costliest products of Cathay [China] itself and every other province.

MARCO POLO, *The Travels of Marco Polo*

A fellow prisoner gathered Polo's stories into a book. It was an instant success in Europe, but most readers did not believe a word of it. They thought Polo's account was a marvelous collection of tall tales. It was clear to Marco Polo, however, that the civilization he had visited was the greatest in the world.

## The End of Mongol Rule

During the last years of Kublai Khan's reign, weaknesses began to appear in Mongol rule. In an attempt to further expand his empire, Kublai sent several expeditions into Southeast Asia. His armies and navies suffered many humiliating defeats at a huge expense of lives and equipment. Heavy spending on fruitless wars, on public works, and on the luxuries of the Yuan court burdened the treasury and created resentment among the overtaxed Chinese. This presented problems that Kublai's less able successors could not resolve.

## History Makers



### Kublai Khan 1215–1294

As ruler of both China and the Mongol Empire, Kublai Khan straddled two worlds. He built luxurious palaces, dressed as a Chinese emperor, and supported the work of Chinese artists. However, he remained a Mongol warrior at heart.

The Great Khan is said to have planted a plot of grass from the steppe in the gardens at Beijing to remind himself of his home. He also loved to hunt and enclosed a large hunting ground at his palace at Shangdu.



### Marco Polo 1254?–1324

The man who described Kublai Khan to Europeans left behind very little information about himself. According to Polo, Kublai recognized his "merit and worth" and sent him on special missions around the empire. His impressions of China became the basis of his book, but he described

few actual events about his life.

Since his book first appeared, people have debated whether Polo even visited China. He is not mentioned in Chinese accounts of this time. His tales also fail to mention such common features of China as tea, acupuncture, or foot binding. On his deathbed, Polo was asked if his travel stories were true. He replied that he had told barely half of what he had seen.

#### INTEGRATED TECHNOLOGY

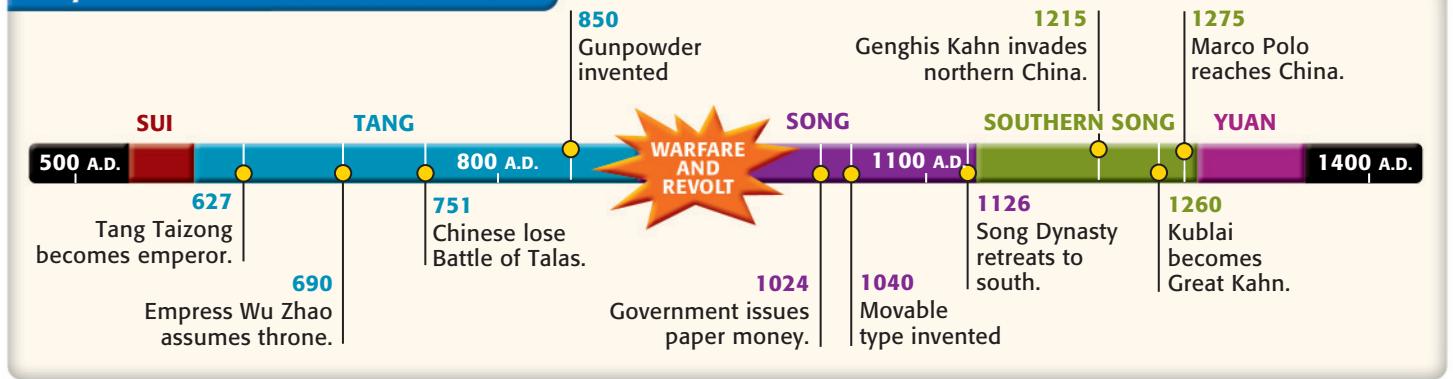
**RESEARCH LINKS** For more on Kublai Khan and Marco Polo, go to [classzone.com](http://classzone.com)

#### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Motives

**B** Why do you think Kublai Khan employed Marco Polo?

## Dynasties of China, 500–1400



**Yuan Dynasty Overthrown** Kublai Khan died in 1294. After his death, the Yuan Dynasty began to fade. Family members continually argued over who would rule. In one eight-year period, four different khans took the throne.

Rebellions broke out in many parts of China in the 1300s. The Chinese had long resented their Mongol rulers, and the Mongol humiliation of the Chinese only increased under Kublai Khan's successors. The rebellions were also fueled by years of famine, flood, and disease, along with growing economic problems and official corruption. In 1368, Chinese rebels finally overthrew the Mongols. The rebel leader founded a new dynasty, the Ming, which you will read about in Chapter 19. **C**

**Decline of the Mongol Empire** By the time of the collapse of the Yuan Dynasty, the entire Mongol Empire had disintegrated. The government of the Ilkhanate in Persia fell apart in the 1330s. The Chagatai khans ruled Central Asia until the 1370s. Only the Golden Horde in Russia stayed in power. The Golden Horde ruled Russia for 250 years. As you read in Chapter 11, Ivan III finally led Russia to independence from Mongol rule in 1480.

The rise and fall of Mongol rule affected civilizations from eastern Europe to China. Kublai Khan had tried to extend this influence to Japan but had failed. However, several centuries earlier, the Japanese had embraced the influence of an outside culture—China. This development is described in Section 4.

### MAIN IDEA

#### Analyzing Causes

**C** What factors contributed to the decline and fall of the Yuan Dynasty?

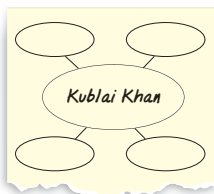
## SECTION 3 ASSESSMENT

**TERMS & NAMES** 1. For each term or name, write a sentence explaining its significance.

- Kublai Khan
- Marco Polo

### USING YOUR NOTES

2. Select one of the entries. Did this event make China stronger or weaker?



### MAIN IDEAS

- Why did the Mongols employ foreigners rather than Chinese in high government offices?
- How did Europeans view Marco Polo's account of his time in China?
- What happened to the Yuan Dynasty after Kublai Khan's death?

### CRITICAL THINKING & WRITING

- EVALUATING DECISIONS** Judging from the events of the Yuan Dynasty, do you think the Mongol policies toward the Chinese were effective? Explain your answer.
- RECOGNIZING EFFECTS** What impact did the Mongol Peace have on interaction between East and West?
- FORMING AND SUPPORTING OPINIONS** Do you think that Kublai Khan was a successful ruler? Why or why not?
- WRITING ACTIVITY** **CULTURAL INTERACTION** Adopt the role of a traveler in Mongol China. Write a **letter** to friends explaining how the Chinese way of life has influenced the Mongol conquerors.

### CONNECT TO TODAY WRITING A SUMMARY

Some people consider Marco Polo to be the first travel writer. Locate modern travel writing on China. Select and read descriptions of major cities, such as Beijing. Using photographs and sketches, create an **illustrated summary** of the main points included in the descriptions.